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# News Release



<http://ventura.fws.gov>

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## **SERVICE CONCLUDES CRITICAL HABITAT DESIGNATION PROCESS FOR LANE MOUNTAIN MILK-VETCH**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concluded the process of designating critical habitat for the endangered Lane Mountain milk-vetch in the west Mojave Desert, Calif. The Service announced that a federal management plan that includes measures to conserve the species and the need for military readiness has resulted in the exclusion of lands proposed as critical habitat for the plant.

Three units, totaling 29,522 acres, had been proposed as critical habitat in April 2004. These areas were excluded in the final rule for several reasons. Military lands on the Army's Fort Irwin were excluded for national security reasons because of the importance of training activities on the facility. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands were excluded because the West Mojave Plan, which is nearing completion, provides sufficient protections for the plant.

Approximately 4,321 acres of private lands were also proposed as critical habitat. More than half of this acreage has already been purchased by the Army and has therefore been excluded from critical habitat. Acquisition is continuing with purchased lands either being added to Fort Irwin or transferred to the BLM.

The final critical habitat rule will be published in the *Federal Register* Friday, April 8.

"The BLM has developed a set of management actions to protect and conserve Lane Mountain milk-vetch," said Steve Thompson, manager of California-Nevada Operations for the Service. "This plan provides strong commitments for actions that will help the species persist."

When specifying an area as critical habitat, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires the Service to consider economic and other relevant impacts of the designation. If the benefits of excluding an area outweigh the benefits of including it, the Service may exclude an area from critical habitat, unless this would result in the extinction of a threatened or endangered species.

Under the ESA, critical habitat identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. Critical habitat has a regulatory impact only on Federal agencies; private or non-Federal agencies are not affected, unless they undertake projects that involve Federal funding or permits.

Lane Mountain milk-vetch is a perennial herb in the pea family that grows only in an area of the west Mojave Desert north of the city of Barstow in San Bernardino County. The milk-vetch is unusual in that its twining branches grow up inside other shrubs, which it uses for support. The plant's rate of reproduction varies greatly, and years of high reproduction are uncommon.

In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection for most listed species, while preventing the agency from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the ESA, including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for listed species is provided on many of the Service's National Wildlife Refuges, and state wildlife management areas.

A copy of the final rule, economic analysis, and other information about Lane Mountain milk-vetch is available on the Internet at <http://ventura.fws.gov>, or by calling the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office at 805/644-1766.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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